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ABSTRACT

In January 1986, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) issued several recommendations with far-reaching implications for Virginia's colleges and universities, namely, "that all state-supported institutions of higher education establish procedures and programs to measure student achievement." By all accounts the English department of Virginia Military Institute (VMI) assumed an early and preemptive role in the assessment initiative. The assessment committee had devised a 3-part assessment mechanism: (1) an alumni survey every 5 years; (2) annual exit interviews; and (3) a senior capstone portfolio project. Resistance to the portfolio was minimal at first but soon objections arose. Some felt the scoring process, even for just 20 majors, would be unwieldy. Many worried that it would infringe on academic freedom by requiring a certain kind of writing assignment in department courses. Others were concerned about using a writing assessment instrument for work in a department concerned mainly with literature. In the end, portfolio assessment was voted on and passed. A committee has continued to work on remaining concerns. It has refined the process of submission, the requirements for submission, the process of evaluation, and the procedures following failure. It has also worked on a holistic method of scoring. As changes continue to be made, resistance to portfolio assessment seems to be dissipating. The portfolio assessment grading criteria is appended. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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The Writing Portfolio and English Program Assessment: Of Bumps, Bruises, and Lessons Learned

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The Writing Portfolio and English Program Assessment: Of Bumps, Bruises, and Lessons Learned

In January 1986, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) presented our General Assembly with a commissioned report entitled "The Measurement of Student Achievement and the Assurance of Quality in Virginia Higher Education" (Senate Document No. 14). While acknowledging the difficulty and complexity of assessment as an endeavor, SCHEV felt that perhaps not enough was being done to address the public's "right to hold institutions of higher education accountable for effective teaching and learning" (15). Opposed to "a system-wide minimum competency testing program" (15), the Council nonetheless issued several "recommendations" with far-reaching implications for Virginia's colleges and universities: namely, "That all state-supported institutions of higher education establish procedures and programs to measure student achievement" (16), and that they "submit annual reports of progress in developing their assessment programs and concrete, non-anecdotal and quantifiable information on student achievement" (17). A colleague's handwritten notes from a meeting with SCHEV's director suggest the consequences of enacting or ignoring these recommendations: "best hope for future--Assessment. . . . our [higher education's] privileged position in state budget is history. . . . those who can make best case for funding will reap benefits."

By the time I arrived at the Virginia Military Institute in

the fall of 1992, the school was already well-heeled in observing what we have come to think of as the SCHEV Mandate. An Office of Assessment had been established almost immediately following the legislature's endorsement of SCHEV's recommendations and, by 1988, an interdisciplinary Assessment Committee had generated VMI's first full assessment report, an 83-page document that said, in effect, "We're working on it." The Assessment Committee was actively constructing "a comprehensive program of formative evaluation" for the entire VMI experience (1, emphasis added), and at the department level, faculty committees were scrambling to discover and experiment with instruments that would assess the effectiveness of their programs both fairly and in terms that would satisfy SCHEV. The report indicated that "VMI has set a requirement that all departments be fully engaged in some form of assessment by the spring of 1990" (23).

By all accounts, my department, the Department of English and Fine Arts, assumed an early and proactive role in the assessment initiative. If I had to speculate, I would say this was largely due to our faculty's strong belief in the preemptive effort--a group disposition developed over years of weathering an intensely top-down administrative style in virtually all matters of importance. During the 1988-89 assessment effort, the department was one of four at VMI to participate in a pilot administration of the Educational Testing Service's new Major Field Achievement Test (MFAT). Although the students "did not score significantly different from the national mean score," the

faculty were dissatisfied with "the outcomes" of the test (17), not to mention wary of using such a purely "objective" instrument for evaluating a degree program in the liberal arts, and so they set out to create an instrument more reflective of the department's pedagogies and curricular goals.[1] Within two years, The English and Fine Arts Assessment Committee had devised a three-part assessment mechanism that it claimed would satisfy SCHEV: an alumni survey every five years; annual exit interviews with graduating seniors; and a senior capstone portfolio project. No part of this program should have been controversial; only the last part was, and to some degree it remains so.

The possibilities of the portfolio as an assessment tool were introduced in departmental meetings late in the 1989-1990 academic year. Several of my colleagues had used portfolios in their composition classes, and they suggested that the concept could be adapted to yield the kind of "non-anecdotal and quantifiable" assessment information SCHEV was asking for. A capstone portfolio system would certainly serve as a more comprehensive and informative, not to mention a more humane, method of discovering our majors' various competencies than would any objective content-based test, like the MFAT. Their argument resembled Pat Belanoff's, who has said astutely that portfolios are not everything; they do not tell us everything; but still, "What they are is enough: a way of integrating testing, teaching, and curriculum" (20).

Resistance to the portfolio was minimal at first; after all,

it was preferable to the MFAT or the GRE Subject Test in Language and Literature, which loomed as untried possibilities.[2] But very soon, objections began to surface and became, indeed, the source of much internal strife. Some members of the department felt that the large-scale process of coordinating and team-scoring portfolios, even for just the twenty or so majors our department graduates each year, would be an unwieldy one. Others worried about how the portfolio might homogenize (as opposed to encourage a healthy consistency among) assignments and standards, and that it would ultimately infringe upon academic freedom by affecting the kinds of assignments we could make in our classes (e.g., more "creative" papers, hypertext, and the like). And there was a quite fundamental objection--one that dominated at least two hour-long department meetings--based on the argument that there was an inherent flaw with using a portfolio of writing to assess the work of a fairly traditional literature-oriented English department, whose primary curricular goal was still "to provide a comprehensive program of study for undergraduate majors in English," with an unequivocal emphasis on "the study of literature and the other arts" (VMI, "Goals"). Some faculty complained bluntly that the portfolio placed an "undue emphasis on writing--the 'service' arm of our department . . . as opposed to teaching literature to majors" (VMI, "Memorandum" 2-16-93).

In the fall of 1990, the English department nevertheless voted to adopt the senior capstone portfolio as the primary component of its tri-part assessment program. And on November

11, 1992--during my first semester as a member of the department, as well as a new and decidedly wide-eyed member of the Assessment Committee--we took an even bolder step. Addressing an institutional directive that each department devise a senior project to test the competency of its majors, the department voted to make the portfolio not just an assessment tool: effective with the class of 1997, it would be a graduation requirement (VMI, "Letter" 11-17-92).'

Developing and enacting our senior capstone portfolio program has been a remarkably contentious and difficult enterprise virtually from the start; feathers ruffled in the process have not been completely smoothed even now, four full trial runs later. The requirement has met with degrees of opposition each year, usually just prior to the date the portfolios are due in mid spring, and usually from the same cluster of faculty who continue to believe the system is flawed. The department heard (and rejected) a proposal for a topical senior seminar, offered as a fairer and more sensible opportunity for seniors to demonstrate their competence in literary study as well as writing. We engaged in discussions about the lawsuits that could ensue by failing a portfolio of papers that had earned acceptable grades in the initial grading for our classes (and we in fact weathered exactly this problem--vigorous complaints, but no lawsuit--during our second trial year). We debated faculty claims that the portfolio, with its score sheet and prescribed list of components, was in reality no better than any other

proficiency test, inevitably assessing form much more than substance. We even had a mass protest from one group of students, insisting that, since the portfolio was not yet a graduation requirement, we should not record the scores in their departmental records, and going on to question the ability of the faculty to render "an honest evaluation" of papers outside their "field[s] of expertise" (VMI, "Memorandum" 3-25-94).

None of this has gone unobserved, and our Assessment Committee has worked diligently to address faculty as well as student concerns, all the while honing an assessment instrument that will do what it must: provide a clear window on the abilities and achievement-level of the majors who pass through our curriculum. We have, for instance, refined the process for submission as well as expanded the list of components for the capstone portfolio project. A portfolio must now include at least three complete papers representing at least two of four categories: a senior-year revision of an essay written for freshman composition (submitted with the original version for "value-added" comparison); a research essay written for an upper-level English or Fine Arts course; a non-research essay written for the same; or a personal essay on a topic created anew for each portfolio cycle. In addition, it must include a cover letter detailing the student's reasons for submitting each of the essays and reflecting on his (or her, depending on a forthcoming decision by the United States Supreme Court) development as a writer and an English major. To permit them the opportunity to

represent themselves and their abilities as fully as possible, we now invite students to include other kinds of work; however, to ensure some relative consistency among the material we evaluate, and thus to increase the validity of the instrument for whole-program assessment, we insist that this additional work cannot replace any of the required components.

As for the process, beginning next year, students will submit their portfolios in October for anonymous evaluation by a randomly assigned team (usually two) of English and Fine Arts faculty. Anyone whose portfolio does not pass (i.e., receive an overall holistic score of 3 or better) will be allowed to revise and resubmit once, the following February; if the portfolio does not pass then, May graduation is impossible and a VMI degree in English can be awarded only the following year and only at the discretion of the department head. We urge close communication with the faculty advisor and serious efforts to revise papers for the portfolio in order to head off the dreaded extreme of this scenario. In addition, the Assessment Committee has taken an increasingly active role in the process, sponsoring two or three informational sessions prior to the first date the portfolios are due in order to review the standards and procedure by which the students' work will be evaluated as well as our departmental goals for the assessment program.

Because the stakes are so high for everyone involved, much of our attention has gone to the form that faculty teams use to derive a holistic score for each portfolio (See Appendix A). It

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is not yet perfect, but it does achieve something of a better balance among literary and rhetorical concerns than ever before, and it has the potential to yield the kind of reliable and relatively scientific data that should satisfy SCHEV's need for such information. The form currently requires that portfolios be rated on a scale of 5 (excellent) to 1 (unacceptable) on six common points: Purpose; Organization; Development; Mechanics; Context (defined as "an appropriate understanding of the social and cultural conditions and/or literary conventions informing the works in question"); and quality of the Cover Letter (VMI, "Criteria"). If a freshman paper is included, the quality of its revision is rated. There is also an unscored category called "Other," which the score sheet identifies as a place for evaluators "to give greater importance to less tangible factors, such as evidence of intellectual interest for the subject in the papers" ("Criteria") and to comment on miscellaneous particulars that influenced the holistic score he or she awarded a portfolio. As an indication of how far we have come, this was a gesture to those who objected last year to the deletion of a formal category called "Enthusiasm," which asked readers to divine how enthusiastically the papers had apparently been written and the portfolio compiled.[7]

Faculty, myself included, are still occasionally perplexed by the Context category; and we seem to be in agreement that not very much is learned in the rare instance that someone submits a revised freshman paper. We will continue to refine it, but

overall the evaluation form is working well to indicate the relative quality of a portfolio as a representation of a student's ability to read, think, and write. If this past year's cycle is any indication, in fact, even some of my colleagues who resisted the portfolio have begun to take the process more seriously and participate more fully. The intensity of their opposition has faded noticeably. Perhaps they have accepted the fact that programmatic assessment is inevitable and acknowledged our department's citation as a "leading example" of assessment innovation within "the strongest [assessment] program in the state" (VMI, "Memorandum" 8-19-93; SCHEV, "Memorandum" 10-6-93). I would like to hope, though, that they have come around for another reason, that four years of practice with the program have served to assuage the single factor that many of us sense was at the heart of the resistance to the portfolio: an unpronounced but quite palpable fear--of having colleagues inspect the kinds of work being done in our courses, of having an assessment tool shape the kinds of assignments we feel we can make, of being held accountable for <u>quantifying</u> the <u>product</u> being generated by our curriculum. It is a reasonable concern, certainly. But the Assessment Committee has addressed it with what has essentially been a public relations campaign, one that is being won a little more each year as faculty teams are surprised--and relieved, I think--to discover more similarity than difference in standards for determining excellence or deficiency and communicating those standards within our portfolio evaluation process.

We all acknowledge the fact that the data we have obtained so far are unreliable; the students have not taken the requirement very seriously, likely because they know it will not affect their graduation or even be recorded on their permanent records. They have also been too aware, some would say, of the shakiness behind the scenes as the requirement has been refined. We do have hope for the future, however: two of my four junior advisees have already talked to me about what will be required when they compile their portfolios next fall, for example, and their attitudes have not been grudging. I like to think they exemplify Ed White's assertion that students can be encouraged to view the portfolio as "inherently meaningful and worthwhile--a record of work they have done and want to keep" (120). That is what we tell them, at least; and we mean it.

In the process, we hope that our portfolio requirement will develop as a "meaningful and worthwhile" enterprise for our department as well, providing information that will help us to rethink our pedagogies and our curriculum. This year, the tenth anniversary of the SCHEV Mandate, we are finally poised to reap the benefits of an assessment tool that we believe has developed as a most responsive and humane instrument for indicating how well our department does what it says it does.

Notes

1. The 1988-89 assessment report allowed such innovation, claiming that "it must be held as inviolable rule that the nature, characteristics, and needs of the individual departments are the driving force of departmental assessment initiatives, not the reverse" (22).

2. There was reason to be nervous. SCHEV's recommendations were prefaced by the warning "that assessment can be costly. As institutions establish their programs, they will have to consider ways to minimize costs, by using information already available, by employing sampling techniques, and by adopting standardized tests of achievement where feasible" (15, emphasis added).

3. The original vote made the portfolio a requirement for the class of 1996, or the then-current class of freshmen ("Rats"). A later vote changed this to provide for four years of trial runs before implementing the portfolio as what Ed White calls a "barrier test" (130).

4. It was this category that led people to cite (and even be forced to praise, I suppose) sentences like the one I stumbled on in a portfolio during this past evaluation cycle. In a non-research fine arts essay he included, a student wrote that a coda in Beethoven "commences softly and slow and low and is then built up as if grief has suddenly welled up from the bowels of the human soul and is ready to burst" (Portfolio #10).

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APPENDIX A

Department of English and Fine Arts
Portfolio Assessment Grading Criteria

Please mark the appropriate blocks when grading the portfolios.

5 = excellent
4 = above average
3 = satisfactory
2 = below average
1 = unacceptable

Name of Student:

Overall score (holistic):

An overall score of 3 is required for a passing grade.

1	2	3	4	5	
					Purpose: Papers should have an overall purpose (for example, demonstrate an interesting insight or creative application, or address a real critical problem).
					Organization: Papers should have a logical organization that captures the reader's interest and provides a sense of purpose and direction.
					Development: Papers should develop, illustrate and explain all points: primary material should be discussed and analyzed rather than just summarized, and secondary material should integrate into the organization and further the argument.
					Mechanics: Papers should avoid clumsy, repetitive or pretentious wording, and be free of errors in spelling, grammar, punctuation and diction. If a research paper is included, the format and documentation must be appropriate, correct and accurate.
					Context: At least one paper other than the Pat should show an appropriate understanding of the social and cultural conditions and/or literary conventions informing the works in question.
					Pat Paper Improvement: Is there improvement in style and focus? Does content appear more mature? Are revisions more than cosmetic?
					Cover Letter: Is it well-written, as befits an English major? Does it refer intelligently and specifically to each of the three papers it introduces? Does it contain reflection on the writer's development as writer and English major?

Other: Evaluator may comment on reverse about any other area important to this portfolio.

APPENDIX A cont.

EXPLANATION OF THE SCORE SHEET

1. The overall score is "holistic," which means it is not an average of the numbers in the boxes. Those numbers should serve as guidelines for the relative success of the portfolio in those specific categories, but, on the assumption that a portfolio is more than the sum of its parts, the professor will give a final score that reflects the overall quality of the portfolio.

2. The seven named categories on the score sheet are all considered important by the English Department, but they are not necessarily all equally important. Faculty members will use their individual judgment when they weigh the significance of each category for a given portfolio.

3. In addition, professors may use the category "Other" to give greater importance to less tangible factors, such as evidence of intellectual interest for the subject in the papers, and may thus give a portfolio a higher or lower grade than the raw numbers in the other categories would indicate.